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Touristing home: muddy fields in native anthropology

Claudia N. Câmpeanu

Abstract

In this paper, I explore dilemmas of conducting fieldwork at home. Using examples of my field and analytical notes, I illustrate the emotional, affective charge the process of ethnographic writing can take, especially when one positions herself as a feminist and attempts to produce feminist work. I argue that there is value in allowing ourselves to inhabit this messy analytical space and to use this experience as a basis for useful theorizing.

Keywords: Fieldwork, auto-ethnography, reflexivity, power relations

‘So, I think my problem, and ‘our’ problem, is how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world, one that can be partially shared and that is friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness.’ (Haraway 1991 p187)

Introduction

After six years of studying in the US, I returned home to Romania for dissertation fieldwork in the tourist destination of Sighisoara, sixty km away from my own home town. Fieldwork, in a sense, was a gift to myself, my parents, and my friends back home. I would allow myself to be, socially and culturally, at home, again, for an extended period of time. Fieldwork turned out to be a constant process of navigating through and negotiating intersecting and contorted subjectivities. A nostalgic diasporic me, returning home, financially independent and politically engaged. A colonizing me, educated and formed as an adult and a scholar in ‘America.’ A daughter, a friend, an acquaintance, caught in a web of supporting and contriving relationships that extended well into the past and into the future. A constant in-between, not quite at home, but not away either, interpellated by foreigners as a privileged and accessible insider, and by locals, as somebody who, just like any other tourist, has temporarily been brought here by some incomprehensible desire

and can leave at any time for a better place. Writing ethnography has been equally problematic, as it continued my particular affective engagement with the field/home, and it constantly confronted me with inadequate epistemologies of distance and difference invoked by 'doing' and 'writing up' ethnographic research.

This paper was written in the midst of that experience and it reflects both the messiness of the ethnographic process and its affective weight. During that process, I realized that my most productive and satisfying thinking and writing have come from allowing myself to come at peace with and inhabit this muddy and shifting field. In this paper, I describe this as a gendered experience, I explore the possibilities that such insights might open for myself and for ethnographic practice. In the same time, I reflect upon the relevance these analytical gestures might have for feminist approaches to conducting ethnographic research.

I made the choice to keep intact some of this writing, as an honest document and, in some ways, as a performance of the writing process itself, at times framing it and explicating it for the sake of clarity and usefulness. In this paper, I am reproducing in italics bits of early writing - fieldnotes, analytical notes, parts of a dissertation draft. Much of this writing was lost by the last draft, and it might feel now over-indulgent and self-absorbed. But, I believe it is important to allow it to have a public existence, as a way to access these struggles and also show how they can serve as a fertile ground for theorizing.

At the moment of its formulation, my dissertation project was to investigate, broadly, the ways in which local processes in Sighișoara, Romania, articulate with global ones. I chose to focus on tourism development and transformations in the built landscape, with no explicit intention to focus on gender or on ethnicity (trying to elude a traditional focus in all sociological and anthropological studies in the region). Sighișoara is a small town - less than 60 km south of the town where I grew up and lived for most of my life - stuck, in some ways, on thinking of tourism as the most promising developmental solution. During my stay there between May 2004 and August 2005 I worked with several NGOs, and most closely with one I will call the

Center. I was employed there for most of my stay and made some lasting friendships that continue even today. I returned to Austin, TX, to write my dissertation, and struggled—mostly emotionally—with the process for almost three years. The final product looked nothing like what I set out to produce, and I locate the deviation in an affective journey in which I attempted to negotiate, from far away, my relationship to my ‘field,’ my ‘home,’ my ‘subjects,’ and my ‘friends.’ The intensity of that journey is now mostly gone, as Marilyn Strathern promised in her discussion of this paper when I presented it at the ASA conference in London in 2007, but I take away the lesson that the clean academic process is always born out of messy and muddy intellectual, emotional, and moral struggles, and that these struggles appear particularly messy and muddy when we position ourselves as feminist scholars and we aim to produce feminist work.

On the difficulty of a politics of location

I'm trying to take apart the threads of my excitement, that first day I spent in Sighișoara doing 'fieldwork.' I am trying to relive it, with all its contradictions, to get close to it, and it's so hard; I miss home, and writing about it as a 'field' is a painful attempt to distance myself from it while keeping it close, in ways that right now seem, to me, absurd.

You see, being home, after six years spent mostly in the US, was a gift to myself and my parents. Fifteen months, spent continuously within 60 kilometers of the place where I grew up, from the people that I love most and that I miss, even now, when I am writing these words. Allowing myself to be myself as I used to be, smart and funny, in Romanian, with my sweet ardelean accent that means absolutely nothing here in the US, with all the gossip and incessant talking, with all the little things of the everyday, brushing against people on the street, and walking everywhere, and buying bread daily on my way home. Now, grown up, I could see how life could have been, suspending myself from my life as a student in a seemingly endless graduate career and also from my parents' expectations of their only twenty-eight year

old, formerly brilliant, daughter. I could live home, finally, if only for a little while.

This is what I felt when I first stepped into the main square of the citadel, that morning. I was so happy. And this is why it pained me so much to write about Sighișoara. Because fieldnotes, and interviews and everything that I gathered are, ultimately, memories of home, of myself at home. Because they are all wrapped in my love for that place and my sorrow for having to distance myself from it through writing. Because trying to get close to it as a field becomes sinking, painfully, in my loss.

Scraping against this nostalgic engagement with the field/home were expectations about the ethnographic research and writing I was to produce. These expectations located the possibility for useful theorizing (theorizing that counts) in a process of partially removing my home from my own affective geography, and attaching it through objective analysis to the larger disciplinary field and its careful collection of 'fields' where, to paraphrase Clifford Geertz, '...our Trobriands, our Nuerland, our Tepoztlan' continue to be (Geertz 1995:101). My home was to speak to theory X, Y, and Z, and be like field A and B and certainly very different from field C and D. Theory M does not seem to work, which makes me think N might. My disorienting subjectivities were to resurface as *locations*, stable enough under my own gaze to allow for that kind of useful and careful theorizing.

While I found Donna Haraway's call for a '...politics and epistemology of location' (1991:195) useful and somewhat soothing for its recognition of the problematic process through which we produce knowledge, I experienced it at that moment as stressful and pushing me towards an objectification and reduction I was not comfortable with. What were to be my locations, how could I separate them, analytically, when I experienced them simultaneously, in multiple, fluid, and unarticulated dimensions? Making that analytical move seemed like a betrayal and, in the same time, a renunciation, a letting go, as painful as physically leaving home.

Instead of being able to make the 'I was there' move towards authority in ways that have become the cannon, I withdrew into a paralyzing 'I am not there and everybody else still is.' Authority became for me intimately connected to affective allegiance, and made any sense of authorial, theoretical mastery a preposterous and disrespectful gesture. The hardest, I think, was transforming what I had until then thought of as *home*, a nostalgic land, into a *field*, the very core of my professional identity and authority, the key to my success as an anthropologist.

I wallowed at the edge of this troubled space for months, powerless and despaired, until out of exhaustion I stepped right into it. It turned out that I was partially conceding the battle with the institution of anthropology (following its well beaten, easy recognizable canonical paths), but I was also making an agential and satisfying move, a compromise that allowed me to access particular kinds of truths that I deemed important.

I hoped I would write from spaces of love and sweet yearning. I worked, instead, from other spaces, spaces of anger and disappointment, around the points where I could easily see my affective and analytical engagements with the field articulate. These were spaces of temporary separation and removal, of splitting my allegiance along lines that would later become clearer. In the same time, they were also fertile, generative spaces. Their richness was located both in my analytical vision (recognizing familiar analytical possibilities that I have been *trained* to do) and in my redemptive affective relationship to what, by now, had successfully become the 'material.'

To make this a little more concrete: in writing one dissertation chapter about the transformations of the public spaces in the Sighișoara citadel, I built part of it around a series of moments of frustration, irritation, and even anger. My analytics were grounded in my emotions and my affective experience of the social reality I was trying to explicate. These moments were part of the politics of my everyday life there, and connected to my extended experience of growing up and living in the area, as well as the experience of those around me. These moments were also drawn in and seeping into the social and emotional intimacies I developed with what

I came to see as my 'allies' at the time I was conducting research. My attempts to establish a neutral, de-politicized presence in the 'field' became a ridiculous, and, after a couple of months, disabling exercise in futility. I chose sincerity - to hijack the term as proposed by John L. Jackson Jr. (2005) - as my compass for sanity, managing my social persona, conducting research, and even writing about it. In choosing who I was to be to the people I was 'researching' and also working with and being with on a daily basis, I opted to be carried away and allow myself to be quite often my Romanian local self, with friends and people I disliked, with daily frustrations and excitements that crossed the line of what some would see as professional ethnographic conduct.

Cultural relativism made no sense for me at the time, as my reactions were just points on a lived continuum from my childhood through early adulthood and all the summers I spent in the area for the past six years. I plunged ahead into this 'authentic' social self and I indulged in it in my writing, to the point where I attracted criticism from frustrated readers and dissertation committee members. I am not naïve to believe that I was able to somehow erase my position as a foreign educated, and thus quite privileged woman, I am just suggesting that, tactically, in the everyday, I was closer to the way my family and friends back home know me than to what I present to my peers here, in the US.

Gender, drinking, and politics - first glimpses of how power worked in Sighisoara

The truth is that I hated drinking, and this is not to say I don't drink alcohol myself, like most people I know. Drinking conjures for me the practice of drinking alcohol, centered on public male sociality, with everything that seems to be connected to. It was not my intention to write about it or even think about it. My first day of explicit 'fieldwork' in Sighișoara, I looked for a job (I had no funding for my research but I had labor) and got to talk to Martin, who was running an NGO, 'The Center,' right in the heart of the historical citadel. For self-financing purposes, the Center owned a restaurant with a courtyard and a patio in the central square of the citadel.

My first encounter with Martin was on the patio around noon—he was drinking beer. I met him a couple of hours later, in the courtyard, when I discussed the details of my employment. He was still drinking, and we were joined by a second man, Ghiță, larger, in his fifties, sweating profusely, and also involved in the NGO. Ghiță was not drinking beer, but he had a smaller glass filled with a clear liquid, from which he was sipping noisily every now and then. I guessed vodka, and the next fifteen months proved me right. I was going to work for the festival they were organizing, and after that they would see if they needed me anymore.

I didn't think much of their sitting and drinking at the time. If anything, it brought some excitement, some bohemian flavor to the place. Everybody seemed to be sitting and drinking, either in the main square patios or on the more private patios or courtyards in the back. I sat down with Rareș and Vera (two high school friends of mine) for a coffee that first day. And I continued to sit and have teas and coffees and beers (in the evening), but as the time went by, my sitting and drinking became more rare, replaced by the routine of the everyday work.

But the space always felt full, and smooth, and homogeneous, and inclusive, in a way. There was also a sense that the boundaries between work and leisure, labor and consumption, and even professional and personal were somewhat fluid and irrelevant.

Martin and Ghiță would mainly sit and talk and drink, sometimes coming late and staying late into the night, with friends/fellow drinkers and artists. It was hard for me to tell when they were on the job and when not, if they were paying for their drinks, getting them on the house or charging them to their mounting accounts.

It didn't bother me that much for the first couple of weeks. I soon became some kind of glorified secretary—I have to thank my friend J. A. for this term—able to write well and translate quickly and give efficient solutions to various problems, but having absolutely no executive power. I wasn't alone in this, the other three women I worked with shared my situation. I had to get higher approval for every little thing. I would go and check with Martin, but I soon learnt that he couldn't be bothered with any details and would refer me to Ghiță, who would only show up around eleven, and sit out on the patio, smoking, waiting for noon, when the place could start serving hard liquor. Right after noon, he would start drinking, and soon other men would start appearing from nowhere and drink with him.

One week into my job, I decided to take matters into my own hands and I wrote without higher consultation my first document, a media partnership agreement. I printed it out and took it downstairs for him, in the courtyard, to read over and approve. Of course, he was sitting outside and drinking. I approached the table and I addressed him, holding the paper up, an invitation for him to look. He didn't even acknowledge my presence. I got closer to him and meekly spoke into his ear, 'Can you please read this?' He turned towards me, 'not now, can't you see I'm busy?' I was completely frozen and I just couldn't move. He was sitting, with friends, in the middle of the day, talking politics or what not, too busy to do his own work that he was getting paid for! All I felt was frustrated, steaming anger. I left the printout on the table, next to his vodka glass, and I went upstairs, into my office, to calm down. But, the anger stayed there, smoldering, and I can feel it even now, rereading my notes and reminiscing about those moments. It took me weeks and long commiserating talks with other women (who had their own similar stories) to start pulling out the threads in my anger and see, in good old feminist fashion, the political in the personal. That experience got repeated, over and over, in many other ways, with the same sense of exclusion, and less worth. And that experience wasn't mine only.

I obviously hadn't entered this particular plane of interpretation without baggage. For the past fifteen years I had witnessed in my own neighborhood in Tg. Mureș all the drinking establishments—which we called 'crâșme'—sprouting and thriving, when many other businesses failed. Just within two blocks of my home there were seven of them. The pubs, mere holes in the wall, would always be full with working men, particularly in the evening. They were vital spaces of male sociality, conveniently harboring men away from their home chores, and wives, and children. It would be gratuitous, maybe, to rant about the deep-seeded misogyny in Romania which has survived despite the socialist promises for gender equality and equivalence. The socialist state had mostly left the family alone (and memories of the family as 'the basic cell of society' are still pounding in my head, residues from my first fourteen years of life, and textbooks, newspapers, and the TV). So men have left women to do their 'job' at home and have retreated into public spaces, drinking and talking. Many people in Romania have lately become more ambivalent about drinking, recognizing it as indexing some kind of problem, but unwilling to clearly relate it to structural, gendered inequalities. Between two jokes about men beating up wives that deserve it, people would admit that domestic violence is bad and exists because abused, the alcohol 'takes your mind,' especially if you're poor.

In Sighișoara, all the sitting and drinking pointed for me to the fact that the current spatial, economic, and political transformations were incredibly accommodating to these gender arrangements. Male sociality, time consuming and relying heavily on public consumption of alcohol or just public consumption, was central in many ways to the transformation of the citadel, and the citadel square in particular, into a tourist space, to be consumed and to consume in. Over the past four years, the square had been almost completely covered with terase (patios) and vendor stands, drawing most of their sales from alcohol.

Drinking seemed to be about taking time away from all kinds of labor, paid or domestic. Martin and Ghiță were sitting and drinking, and I have seen Rareș (who was running a small hotel) and his friends drinking in the square, during the day but especially in the evening, while I knew his wife, Vera, was at home alone with their son.

But this didn't mean that all men working there would drink, especially when it came to working hours. Nea' András and nea' Dorel , two handymen hired by the Center, had unsurprisingly a drinking habit, as well. They would arrive, punctually, at 7 AM every day to do their work. I would bump into them downstairs in the bar while I was getting my coffee, where they would often purchase a 'déci,' the Hungarian short for 100 ml, of the cheap cumin liquor 'Rachiu Secuiesc.' Sometimes, they would bring their own alcohol. They would diligently go in the other downstairs, sit quietly for an hour or so, sipping their liquor. Despite my growing aversion for men's drinking, I almost found that endearing. But, this act didn't last that long. As soon as Martin figured out what they were doing, midway through the fall, made them come in at 8, since they were starting to work at 8 anyway, and ordered them not to drink while on the job. Thus, drinking was, in a way, implicated in drawing boundaries between work and leisure that were not only gendered, but also classed.

During my stay in Sighișoara I worked with another NGO, 'A.' Work might be too pretentious a term. We would actually meet and talk every week, Tuesday afternoons and late into the evenings. The people in the organization, mostly men, were very concerned with high moral standards, which ranged generously from progressive politics to very conservative Christian views. They didn't like Martin, and his drinking, and any extensive public drinking. They didn't like the local administration and all the big and small corruption that everybody seemed to be involved with. One February Tuesday, we decided to hold our weekly meeting at a café in the main square. The café served no alcohol, but rather pricy coffee and locally made sweets.

We had teas and cookies and talked for about two hours about the past, present, and future of Sighișoara, the way we usually did. I imagine that if it had been summer, we would have sat on the café's patio in the square, a few meters away from the other, alcohol-serving, establishments.

It occurred to me, then, that this tea drinking (and the meetings every Tuesday) was just like drinking alcohol, touching elbows with Martin, and Ghiță, and all the other men. It wasn't all about alcohol, or drinking, it was about being able to take this time to sit and do absolutely nothing, away from home, its chores, wives, and children. It was a space that I had access to because I was young, and single, and financially independent, and doing research. (The other woman that attended regularly was also young, single, and financially independent, and would be the meeting's 'secretary,' taking notes.) Male sociality, alcohol or no alcohol, was pleating well with the commercialization of these spaces.

About three months into my 'tenure' at the Center, a new character entered the scene: Marga, who later also became a really good friend of mine. A southern transplant to Sighișoara, she was a Sociology doctoral student looking for some interesting work in this small town where she was stuck after marrying her local husband. Marga was bold, articulate, and self-assured. And, boy, she knew how to drink. Before she was hired—while she was still being 'evaluated'—she used to sit with Martin and Ghiță, participate in their meetings and even decisions about projects at the Center. Marga was in the end hired and put to work, just like the other nice women in the organization. She was soon on the other side, plowing away through piles of work and frustration, grants and reports to write, slack to pick up from Martin and Ghiță.

So drinking was not only gendered and classed. It was also about decision making, about arrangements of power, about defining, performing, and enforcing hierarchies. And, as it turned out, it was about shaping politics, and

particular kinds of access to the public sphere, all related to consumption and leisure.

As small and sometimes inconsequential as it is, 'A' still participates in the local politics, and its members are inserting themselves, and their issues, in the local political scene. Their feminized participation—both as an NGO/feminized politics and tea-sippers/cookie-eaters—was balanced out by their access to leisure in this space as well as by their assertion that what they are doing is politics. They were timidly shaping themselves into political actors, into people that matter, and thinking of them I am reminded that doing politics is a practical issue, it takes time, and only those who are able to take time for themselves are able to participate.

The citadel square was literally a space where politics happened and connected to the local economy. The Center's patio, as well as the other public or semi-public ones in the square and the courtyards, would often be frequented by local business owners and managers, in particular the tourist ones. They all seemed to be friends, and would spend long hours talking and drinking, probably discussing national politics, and sports, and local politics and business. One of the two tourist associations in town, and the most powerful, was made up of people that I would often see sitting together, even late into the evening. Some of them would be elected in the Local Council, frequently voting on issues related to public and city owned spaces, preparing them for tourism and consumption.

From anger and solidarity, to partial, modest truths

I had set out to write about capitalism, attempting to find ways to talk about it and understand its workings, in particular those related to tourism development and the transformations of public spaces in Sighișoara. My venting as theorizing significantly detoured my analysis and I ended up feeling that I could not talk about capitalism without explicitly linking it to gendered and class arrangements of power, consumption, leisure and labor. Rather than being a central object of my project,

tourism and tourist development became more of a mode of articulating all these, above-mentioned, issues.

I wrote—out of intellectual laziness, some might say—from the inside of this troubled space of intersecting subjectivities and unashamed, self-serving affective curiosity. My self-reflexive theorizing and writing allowed me access to truths that I can be at peace with and I can ally myself with comfortably. I was, in a way, settling for soft, weak authority, centered on my experience, my self-awareness, as well as a disciplinary-wide, shared paranoia about the limits and politics of representation.

But, I ask, what kind of anthropology is this? What kind of ethnography is this? How far is it from something that, as Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Cohen aptly put it, 'seems devoid of the capacity to empower anyone but the writer and the reader for whom it serves as academic collateral or therapy' (Mascia-Lees, et al. 1989)? In trying to resolve the ethical issues that have historically plagued the ethnographic process, how far is self-reflexive writing (mine, in this particular case) from, simply put, impressionistic, self-absorbed travel writing? How much redemptive weight can I put on my own bitter-sweet affective engagement with my own home, on my conviction that my partial truths, truths that emerge out of particular situations, are truths that matter?

The only solid (but not unproblematic) ground from where I can ultimately speak is my feminist politics, which articulate, partially and often on an affective level, with the lived experiences of the many women I worked with in Sighișoara. My politics (in their abstract but mostly in their lived incarnations) helped me see how my allegiance to my beloved home can split along lines that can both privilege the women's experience and be grounded in my problematic, colonizing presence (as a 'trained' feminist).

But, few of the women I worked with would recognize themselves in any account of my feminist politics, and this makes me suspicious (as it should make anyone) of the possibility for a feminist ethnography, or activist anthropology for that matter. Just like in Patricia Zavella's (1996) example (when her feminist analysis was at odds

with the identity and interests of the Chicano community), my own feminist analysis inhabits a space of tension and confusing theoretical allegiances. I experienced the world through the day-to-day frustrations and struggles of these women (the few struggles that my privileged position gave me access to), rooted my understandings in past experiences at home, and I trust the insights I gained. But, in the same time, I am queasy about speaking for, representing these women, objectifying their lives and fueling my academic career with the decaying corpses of the friendships I created while in the field and, Judith Stacey was right (1988), feminist ethnographers run a greater risk of creating damage through abandonment and betrayal of the strong relationships they create). I write and have been writing from this space of tension, caught between feminism and anthropology and the impossibility of their reconciliation (Strathern 1987), having faith in the insights I can thus gain and feeling (relatively) at peace with the knowledge I am producing and circulating.

Yes, there is an inherent contradiction in feminist ethnography, exacerbated by working as an 'insider' to the community, in a context in which tourism and the privileges of physical mobility are an important lens for imagining and understanding local social arrangements and transformations. This does not mean that the possibility does not exist—we should be all making room for it by recognizing the limits of trying to represent other people's experiences, and by striving instead to provide something closer to a modest and sincere testimony, which I hope I did.

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